

The Nine Affects and the Compass of Shame

We have talked about how affective questions and statements and other restorative processes provide opportunities for people to express themselves. The psychology of affect, based on the work of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, helps us better understand why human beings act and respond in certain ways and why restorative practices works so well.

According to Tomkins, affects are nine innate biological programs (see Figure 6). They are instantaneous reactions to stimuli in one's environment. Feelings are the awareness of the presence of affect. They are experienced seconds after an affect has been triggered. Emotions are the learned responses from the accumulated stories and scripts acquired through experience of one's family, culture and community. A neat way to remember this is: "Affects are our biology, feelings are our psychology and emotions are our biography" (Thorsborne and Kelly, 2013).

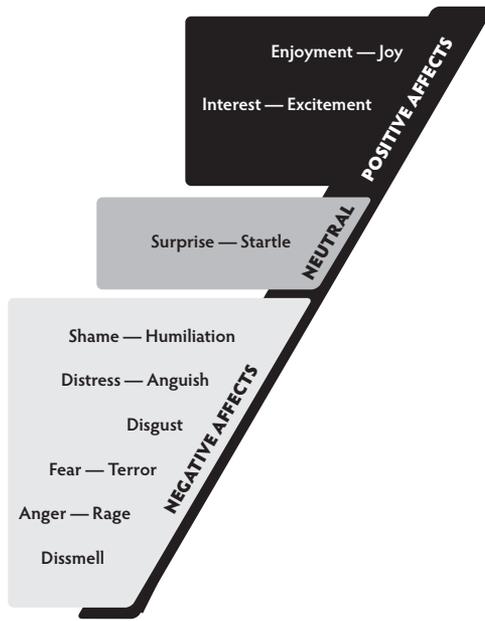


Figure 6. The Nine Innate Affects. Adapted from Tomkins, 1962, 1963 & 1991.

Most affects are experienced within a range from mild to strong. Two of the affects, interest–excitement and enjoyment–joy, are positive. Surprise–startle is a neutral affect, and its impact is analogous to a restart button on a machine, clearing our mind of whatever we were thinking and allowing it to focus on whatever comes next. Six affects are negative: shame–humiliation, distress–anguish, fear–terror, anger–rage, disgust and dissmell. Disgust and dissmell (a word that Tomkins invented) are not expressed as a range but are distinctive reactions to a bad taste or a bad smell that direct us to expel or avoid whatever is causing the negative reaction.

Donald Nathanson, a psychiatrist who built on and extended his mentor Tomkins’ work, focused his attention on the affect of shame–humiliation. In his book *Shame and Pride* (1992), he explained Tomkins’ perspective that there seems to be no specific chemical or electrical triggers for shame, as there are for the other affects. Instead, shame is defined quite simply as the reaction to any interruption of a positive affect.

This definition is often puzzling to a newcomer to the psychology of affect. But it is based on Tomkins’ extended observations of his own children: They looked downward and averted their eyes in shame whenever they were interrupted while enjoying or showing interest in something. These minor instances of shame helped Tomkins realize that shame does not occur just when you do something wrong, but whenever your positive affects are interrupted. In a much more serious context, this perspective helps explain why victims of crime experience a sense of shame when they did nothing wrong, having simply experienced a dramatic and harsh interruption of their positive affects.

Nathanson described four ways in which we react to shame. When something terminates a feeling of interest–excitement or enjoyment–joy in us, the shame that takes place points us in one of the four directions described on his “Compass of Shame” (see Figure 7).

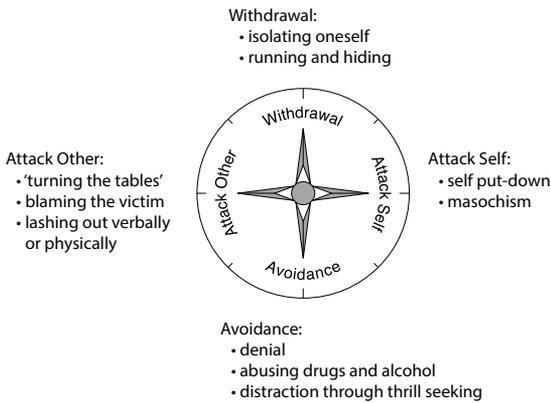


Figure 7. Compass of Shame. Adapted from Nathanson, 1992.

Nathanson observed that when the shame response is triggered, humans respond with “attack other,” “attack self,” “avoidance” or “withdrawal.”

“Attack other” is demonstrated when people blame others for what they’ve done, turn the tables or lash out verbally or physically. The story earlier in this book of the student who went into a rage when she received a paper back with a bad grade is an example of “attack other.” She felt shame and lashed out at the teacher when her positive expectation of a good grade was disappointed.

When people put themselves down, saying things like “I’m so stupid” or “Why can’t I do anything right?” they are demonstrating “attack self.” Some who react to shame by attacking themselves might actually hurt themselves, as in the sad cases of young people who cut themselves.

“Avoidance” usually manifests in denial, where a person tries to sidestep a feeling of shame by ignoring it or by changing the subject with jokes or other distractions. In its most hurtful form, avoidance may involve drug and alcohol abuse or thrill-seeking as a means to avoid feeling the shame.

“Withdrawal” is exemplified by a student who pulls away or feels they want to “run and hide.” This person may simply clam up

when someone tries to talk with them or may withdraw to a private space and refuse to interact with anyone.

Virtually everyone feels or exhibits one or more of these responses every time a positive affect is interrupted. But for most of us, our shame response is mild or short-lived.

Being aware of the Compass of Shame gives us the perspective we need to be restorative when confronting inappropriate behavior. When we call a parent about a child, for example, we need to know that the first reaction of the parent may be to deny and avoid, saying, “He doesn’t act like that at home.” Or the parent may attack others, turning the tables and blaming the teacher or the school for their child’s behavior. Nathanson observed that, in our society, attacking others and avoidance are the most frequent responses to shame. Educators should learn to expect these responses when they approach parents.

We can also use the Compass of Shame to examine our own reactions. For example, when we as teachers have put a lot of hard work into a lesson we think is going to be fun for our students, and then in the first five minutes a student criticizes the assignment or a few kids goof off and disrupt the class, we are going to experience shame. Our positive affect has been interrupted, and we will exhibit one of the four responses on the Compass of Shame. Will we lash out at the students, crawl into a shell, blame ourselves or try to deny that anything is wrong? It all depends on who we are, but we can be sure that we will experience at least one of those responses. Our awareness of the Compass of Shame allows us to identify our own response, react less intensely and quickly recover from our shame response.

We may help people transform and move beyond their shame in a number of ways. When people are experiencing and demonstrating shame, we can:

- › Listen to what they have to say
- › Acknowledge their feelings

- › Encourage them to express their feelings and talk about the experience

Nathanson describes Tomkins' blueprint for emotional health, which states that individuals are at their best when they maximize positive affect, minimize negative affect, express affect freely and do as much of all three as possible. Humans are hardwired to experience all of the affects, so individuals should not prevent themselves or anyone else from experiencing any of the affects, including the negative ones. However, Tomkins said that it is appropriate for individuals to favor the positive and not dwell on the negative.

Vernon Kelly says that Tomkins' blueprint also fits the relationship of couples. The relationship between two individuals, called intimacy, is best when they agree to mutualize and maximize positive affect, mutualize and minimize negative affect, allow for the free expression of affect and do as much of all three as possible (Kelly, 2012).

Finally, Nathanson extended Tomkins' blueprint to community, also at its best when larger groupings of people agree to mutualize and maximize positive affect, mutualize and minimize negative affect, allow for the free expression of affect and do as much of all three as possible (Nathanson, 1995). This sharing of collective emotions is what makes it possible for restorative practices to improve relationships and transform a school community.

Australian criminologist John Braithwaite, in his book *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (1988), presents another way of looking at relationships and community. Instead of asking the traditional criminological question, "Why do people commit crimes?" he asks instead, "Why do most people do the right thing most of the time?" We could ask the same question about our students — why do most of them behave in school most of the time? Because they want to be thought well of by those people with whom they have a relationship. Braithwaite notes that restorative processes reinforce appropriate behavior by relying on that critical dynamic — our desire to

maintain or restore a good feeling with those with whom we have a connection. A judge's lecture is ineffective because the offender has no existing connection to that individual, but a mother's tears are a powerful influence because of the offender's long-standing relationship with her.

When a person does do something wrong and is confronted with that wrongdoing, the person experiences shame. Braithwaite emphasizes that how we treat the individual is critical. He urges us to "separate the deed from the doer" by acknowledging the intrinsic worth of the person while rejecting the unacceptable behavior. He warns against stigmatizing the offender by labeling them in a way that sustains their sense of shame and alienation. Braithwaite argues that those in authority must allow the offender to restore their relationships by reintegrating them into society. If an offender cannot restore their relationships, they will seek new relationships with others who also feel alienated from society and join the negative subculture of wrongdoers who see themselves as outside the mainstream.

All the ideas presented above are reflected in the formal restorative conferencing process. During the first part of the conference, when the offender discusses what they have done and people describe their own feelings about the misdeed, the negative affects are expressed freely. The offender experiences shame and usually displays the classic physical response of lowering the head and averting the eyes. As the conference progresses and as feelings continue to be aired, the intensity of the negative affects subsides and the tone of the meeting changes. Positive affects are expressed as the conference moves on to the "making amends" phase. Resolutions are drawn up, and the meeting ends with everyone having refreshments and chatting informally.

The offender and those they have affected all feel better as a result of the opportunity to express emotions freely. As Nathanson's blueprint predicts, the well-being of the community is restored. As Braithwaite predicts, the conference reintegrates the

offender by creating an opportunity for them to move beyond their shame, make things right and restore their existing relationships. Interestingly, the conference also often results in the creation of new relationships.

In every situation where students are confronted with the consequences of their misbehavior, whether through a formal conference or a more informal restorative encounter, offenders are likely to demonstrate shame. When a student bows their head and looks down, we need to recognize this as the classic shame response. We should avoid saying, “Look at me when I’m talking,” because the student is appropriately showing shame. Rather, we need to help them move past their shame, create an opportunity for them to make things right and restore their relationship with the school community.

When the star basketball player, mentioned earlier, pulled his stunt in the gym, the administration had him arrested, rupturing his relationship with the school community. By holding a conference where both positive and negative affects were freely aired, even though he was banned from the graduation ceremony, the young man supported the administration and helped prevent embarrassing outbursts from the students. He moved beyond his shame, graciously accepted his punishment and felt reconnected with the school officials, who reaffirmed their positive regard for him as an individual while rejecting his behavior.

Conflict and misbehavior in our schools are inevitable. When educators remember Nathanson’s blueprint and strive to create an environment that maximizes positive affect, minimizes negative affect and allows for the free expression of affect, they will transform their schools into true communities, where conflict can be dealt with effectively, relationships can be maintained and learning can occur.